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TOSCANINI

WAGNER

DIE MEISTERSINGER—*Preludes I & III*

LOHENGRIN—*Preludes I & III*

A FAUST OVERTURE • SIEGFRIED IDYLL

NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

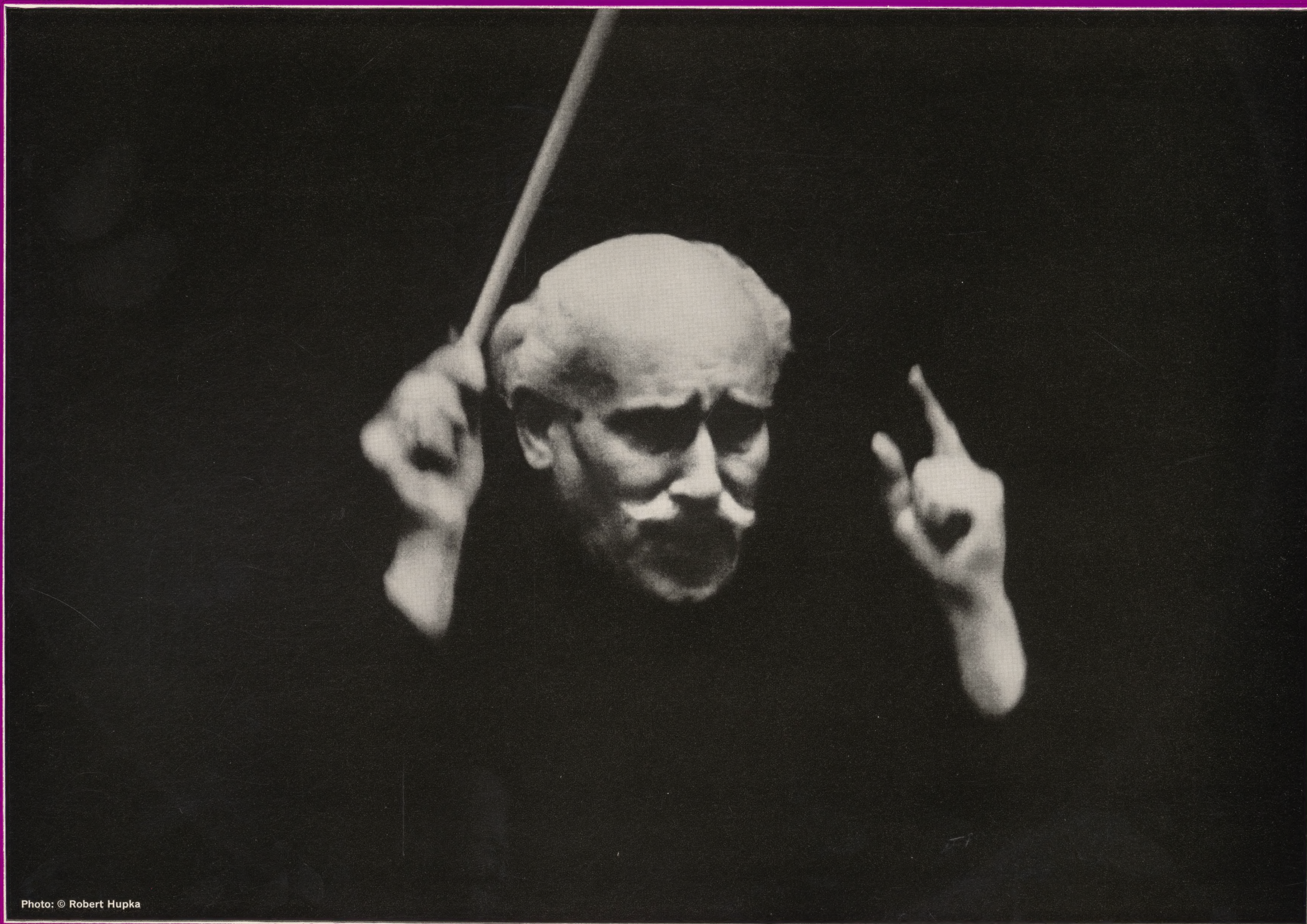


Photo: © Robert Hupka

*Toscanini renders
 "unto Wagner
 that which
 is Wagner's"*

Side 1

Die Meistersinger:

Act I: Prelude (8:50)
 (Recorded March 11, 1946 in Carnegie Hall)
 Act III: Prelude (6:58)
 (Recorded November 26, 1951 in Carnegie Hall)

Lohengrin:

Act I: Prelude (8:33)
 Act III: Prelude (3:04)
 (Recorded October 22, 1951 in Carnegie Hall)

Side 2

A Faust Overture (11:13)
 (Recorded November 11, 1946 in Carnegie Hall)

Siegfried Idyll (17:30)
 (Recorded July 29, 1952 in Carnegie Hall)

Max Reger once described the prelude to *Die Meistersinger* as a work so nearly perfect that its like could be expected only once in a hundred years. Many others have said as much of Arturo Toscanini's re-creative artistry.

Not to labor the analogy, it happens that both the opera and the conductor were born in the same year—1867. After a century, the perfection of *Die Meistersinger* remains undimmed. And thanks to the marvel of recording, The Maestro, similarly, continues to be recognized as unique among the great music-makers of our epoch.

Obviously more than natal coincidence is involved in Toscanini's affinity to *Die Meistersinger*, for he brings to bear the same mighty, mystical force throughout the Wagnerian repertoire. How to define this ineffable but omnipresent reality?

The patrician Lawrence Gilman had it that "Toscanini does with Wagner's music what he does with other music: which is to remind us that the truth about a masterwork is infinitely stranger than the commonplace fictions that lesser interpreters weave about its greatness; that the treasures of beauty and significance in great music are more abundant than we had dared to think . . . Restoration is, I think, the justly descriptive word. For what Toscanini does with this music is to render unto Wagner that which is Wagner's." Yes, indeed.

Of all Wagner's operas, *Die Meistersinger* is perhaps the most popular. Uniquely a composite of fact, fancy and satire, it also contains more soaring melody than the composer ever again wrote for a single theater work. And the glorious prelude distills the whole with such mastery that its separate identity as a concert-hall favorite has been taken for granted since shortly after the première, in Munich, in 1868.

The Mastersinger flourished in Germany between the 14th and 16th centuries. Accordingly, *Die Meistersinger* is set in Nuremberg about 1550. And there really was a Mastersinger named, like Wagner's principal character, Hans Sachs; as in the opera, he was a cobbler by trade. The plot is simply stated: The goldsmith Pogner offers the hand of his lovely daughter, Eva, to the winner of the Mastersingers' song contest. A handsome knight, Walther von Stolzing, gets (and deserves) the award, but not without the aid of the much-beloved Sachs and against the most pathetically persistent opposition of Sixtus Beckmesser.

The symbolism of *Die Meistersinger*, unlike that of some other Wagner librettos, is patent. The villain, Beckmesser, represents not only the composer's arch-nemesis, critic Eduard Hanslick (until discretion prevailed, his name was to have been Hans Lick), but also the many conservative critics who had inveighed against Wagner. It follows that Walther, whose magnificent voice transcends the innumerable petty rules of the Mastersingers' guild, could represent none other than the composer himself. And the hero's receiving the support of Sachs can be construed only as Wagner identifying his artistic philosophy with all that is ancient and honorable.

As the curtain rises on Act III, Sachs is sitting dejectedly, meditating on the folly of man. The prelude, which sets the scene for the famous soliloquy, is built on a contemplative theme appropriate to such musings; Wagner also uses a chorale tune attributed to the historic Sachs.

Lohengrin dates from 1848. It was not a happy year for Europe, and for Wagner it was miserable. Critics had heaped abuse on *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*. He desperately needed a change of luck. It came with *Lohengrin* when it was first mounted at Weimar under the prestigious auspices of Franz Liszt. Wagner did not hesitate to speak of this 1850 production as "the turning point of my life . . ."

Berlioz once summed up the *Lohengrin* prelude as a gradual crescendo leading to a shorter decrescendo. That is literally true, but it hardly does justice to one of the most miraculous evocations in all music—all the more miraculous because it is concerned only with the motif of the Holy Grail. Wagner himself described the music as follows:

Out of the clear blue ether of the sky there seems to condense a wonderful, yet at first hardly perceptible vision; and out of this there gradually emerges, ever more and more clearly, an angel host bearing in its midst the sacred Grail. As it approaches earth it pours out exquisite odors, like streams of gold, ravishing the senses of the beholder. The glory of the vision grows and grows until it seems as if the rapture must be shattered and dispersed by the very vehemence of its own expansion. The vision draws nearer, and the climax is reached when at last the Grail is revealed in all its glorious reality, radiating fiery beams and shaking the soul with emotion. The beholder sinks on his knees in adoring self-annihilation. The Grail pours out its light on him like a benediction, and conse-

crates him to its service; then the flames gradually die away, and the angel host soars up again to the ethereal heights in tender joy, having made pure once more the hearts of men . . ."

The prelude to Act III is a joyous fanfare for Elsa and her bridegroom, Lohengrin. Their marriage is not to endure, but that is another story. This one is all brass and brilliance and, for all its brevity, an unsurpassed test of ultimate orchestral virtuosity.

The original version of *A Faust Overture*—conceived as the opening movement of a symphony—was composed in Paris during the bleak (for Wagner) winter of 1839-40. The piece was given a rehearsal reading by the Conservatoire but was not accepted for performance. The subsequent formal première (Dresden, 1844) was a total disaster; the composer put the work aside and forgot about it until 1855, when he heard that Liszt was writing a symphony on the Faust story. Wagner then began to revise his manuscript, only to end up composing "an entirely new score," although, as he wrote to Liszt, "in no case shall I publish it." It was published, however, the publisher being none other than Liszt. The maharajah of Weimar may have felt that imitation in this instance was sincere flattery, because not only the "program" but also the music itself is indeed darkly, introspectively Lisztian except for its dynamics, which unmistakably reflect the influence of Beethoven.

Wagner and Cosima von Bülow were married at Lucerne in August 1870. Their son, Siegfried, had been born at their nearby island home, Tribschen, some 14 months earlier, coincident with Wagner's long-suspended resumption of work on the opera bearing the boy's name. The *Siegfried Idyll* was composed solely as a gift for Cosima. Its première took place on the staircase of Tribschen, after secret rehearsals, at half-past seven on Christmas morning 1870—Cosima's birthday. Some years later, pressed for money, Wagner reluctantly sent the score to his publisher. That day Cosima confided to her diary: "My secret treasure is becoming common property; may the joy it will give mankind be commensurate with the sacrifice I am making." It has been. Indeed, no other work of Wagner ever attained to more security in public affection than this tender memento of an idyllic love.

—JAMES LYONS
 Editor, *The American Record Guide*

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SIDE
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Die Meistersinger: Act I: PRELUDE
Die Meistersinger: Act III: PRELUDE
Lohengrin: Act I: PRELUDE
Lohengrin: Act III: PRELUDE

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2

A FAUST OVERTURE
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